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## Japan: 400 years since the Great Genna Martyrdom, a "testimony of love"

"The years 2022 and 2023 will mark several 'milestones' for the evangelisation of Japan". These were the opening lines of the New Year message delivered by the President of the Japanese Committee for Promoting Canonisation, Yoshinao Otsuka, Bishop of Kyoto, to mark the "400th Anniversary of the Great Martyrdom of Genna: a testimony of love", a special itinerary proposed by the Japanese Bishops' Conference (JBCJ) to retrace some of the milestones of Gospel proclamation in Japan. However, it is not just a commemorative event, as the Message of presentation underlines. In fact "Now is the time for the Japanese Church to heed the martyrs and experience the special grace of Salvation that God has given to the Japanese Church in today's Church." This itinerary, launched on September 10, ongoing until December 4, 2023, will focus on the martyrdom and persecutions that characterised Gospel proclamation in the Land of the Rising Sun. It will include 'anniversaries' marking the entire year 2022, defined 'milestones' by the Bishops of Japan: the 400th anniversary of the canonisation of St Francis Xavier (March 12, 1622/2022); the 160th anniversary of the canonisation of 26 holy martyrs of Japan (8 June 1862/2022); the 400th anniversary of the creation of the Dicastery for the Evangelisation of Peoples, De Propaganda Fide (22 June 1622/2022); the 400th anniversary of the Great Martyrdom of Genna in Nagasaki (September 10 1622/2022); the 150th anniversary of the abolition of the lifting of the ban on Christianity (24 February 1862/2022); the 400th anniversary of the Great Martyrdom of Edo (December 4 1623/2023). The date of September 10, chosen as the first step of this journey, holds special significance for the Japanese Catholic Community and for the archdiocese of Nagasaki in particular, since this year, this day, marks the 400th anniversary of the "Genna no Dai-Junkyo", the Great Martyrdom of the Genna era, along with the recurrence commemorating Japan's 205 martyrs. On Nishizaka Hill in Nagasaki, the very place where the blood of the first Christian martyrs on Japanese soil was shed on February 5, 1597, with the crucifixion of the 26 protomartyrs Saint Paul Miki and his companions, 25 years later, on September 10, 1622, 55 more Catholics, including Jesuit missionaries, Dominicans and Franciscans, among them the Jesuit priest Carlo Spinola and the Dominican friar Angelo Orsucci, as well as lay faithful, including families with their children, opted for martyrdom rather than abjuration, suffering death by burning or decapitation. In his message, Archbishop Yoshinao Otsuka recalled the words addressed by Pope Francis to the bishops in Tokyo on the occasion of his apostolic journey to Japan, November 23, 2019: "The DNA of your communities is marked by this witness, an antidote against despair, that points out the path they must follow. All the vicious persecutions carried out by the various Shoguns, however, failed to uproot the seed sown by St Francis Xavier since his arrival in Japan on 15 August 1549. We can also think of those 'hidden Christians' of the Nagasaki region – reads Pope Francis' address - whose faith was cherished for generations, thanks to baptism, prayer and catechesis. Authentic domestic Churches that shone forth in this land, perhaps without even realizing it, as reflections of the Holy Family of Nazareth. "In his Apostolic Exhortation 'Nobis in animo' Pope Paul VI explained that alongside the 'history of salvation' there exists a 'geography of salvation'. The reference was to the Sites of the Holy Land, but if we were to apply this to Japan, the Nagasaki region in particular would occupy a privileged position in the 'geography of Salvation' of that country. These are: the 'Holy Hill' of the Martyrs of Nishizaka, on the outskirts of Nagasaki; the Basilica of the Twenty-six Martyrs at Oura, above the port of Nagasaki, where a first group of 'hidden Christians' returned from hiding on March 17, 1865; the 'Mugenzai no Sono', the garden of the Immaculate Conception, a Franciscan complex founded in Nagasaki by Maximilian Kolbe during his missionary work there from 1930 to 1936, miraculously surviving the atomic devastation of 1945; Urakami again, where in 1931 the Moriyama family, a seven-generation descendant of the 'kakure kirishitan', the hidden Christians, welcomed a promising young atheist doctor into their home: Takashi Nagai - through the Christian life testimony of this peasant family he completed his arduous path of

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conversion to Catholicism, and was baptised with the name Paul. Having married Midori, the Moriyama's daughter, he and his bride became remarkable witnesses of 20th century faith. Through the light of faith Takashi 'Paolo' Nagai gave a remarkable reading, perhaps scandalous for some, of the Nagasaki holocaust, the nuclear disaster in which his wife Midori also lost her life: "We ask ourselves: was the convergence of such events, the end of the war and the celebration of the feast of the Assumption of Mary into Heaven, a pure coincidence or a providential sign? I heard that the atomic bomb was meant for another city. Dense clouds made that target too challenging and the pilots aimed for the alternative target, Nagasaki. There was also a technical problem, so the bomb was dropped much further north than had been planned, thus exploding right over the cathedral. Our neighbourhood was certainly not chosen as a target by the crew of the American aircraft. I believe it was God, his providence, who chose Urakami and brought the bomb right onto our homes. Is there not a profound relationship between the obliteration of Nagasaki and the end of the war? Was not Nagasaki the chosen victim, the Sacrificial Lamb, slain to be the perfect offering on the altar after all the sins committed by the warring nations in the Second World War?" Takashi died of leukaemia in 1951, his and his wife's canonisation process is underway. In the light of these testimonies, Pope Francis' tribute at Nagasaki Martyrs' Monument in 2019 retain their powerful relevance still today. "This shrine is above all a monument to Easter – the Pope said - for it proclaims that the last word – despite all evidence to the contrary – belongs not to death but to life. We are not destined for death but for the fullness of life. This was the message the martyrs proclaimed."

Massimo Succi